

Date: 2 August 2012
 Opposition: FC Gomel
 Competition: Europa League

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2 August 2012

THE TIMES

Fortune smiles on Rodgers to help unconvincing start to new regime

Gomel 0

Liverpool 1

A goal from Stewart Downing gave Brendan Rodgers the winning start he had hoped for in his first competitive game as Liverpool manager against Gomel. How victory was secured, though, owed more to good fortune than to good football on a night when Liverpool struggled to come to terms with both their opponents and their own new sense of direction.

The trip to Belarus had been beset with problems and in the first half Liverpool performed as if they did not really want to be playing a competitive fixture in a town 65 miles away from Chernobyl more than two weeks before the Barclays Premier League season begins.

Wasteful in possession and disorganised in defence, only wasteful finishing from Gomel ensured that they went in at the interval still on level terms. There has been much positivity about Liverpool's future under Rodgers since he took over from Kenny Dalglish, but this did not fit in with such optimism.

If the sight of Joe Cole limping off with a hamstring injury after 14 minutes was symbolic of their discomfort, the presence of the lavishly paid 30-year-old in Liverpool's starting line-up illustrated the paucity of attacking options available to Rodgers.

It took until the 50th minute for Liverpool to register a shot on target, Fabio Borini's attempt being comfortably held by Vladimir Bushma. By then, Gomel had already missed several presentable opportunities.

Gomel, third in their country's National League, had the advantage of being mid-season in their domestic championship and their advanced fitness levels were evident throughout. That, though, was far from being the only department in which the hosts were superior and only ill fortune prevented them from taking the lead when Sergey Kozeka's shot hit an upright after 64 minutes.

Dmitry Platonov's miss from the rebound was less excusable and it also proved to be costly as Liverpool took the lead a minute later, Stewart Downing scoring the first goal of Rodgers's tenure with a powerful strike from just outside the penalty area. The understated, almost sheepish, manner in which their new manager celebrated such a landmark moment in his own career told its own story.

The win gave Rodgers a positive start as he sorts the wheat from the chaff in the squad he inherited. That process began with Andy Carroll being told that he has no part to play in Liverpool's future and there will be others who fall by the wayside if they fail to respond to Rodgers's methods.

One player who would almost certainly respond is Daniel Agger, but there are even doubts about the central defender after his agent, Per Steffensen, dismissed suggestions that his client had missed the trip to Belarus because of injury.

"Daniel is not injured," he said. "He's not asked for a transfer -- that's nonsense. Daniel is happy at Liverpool."

For their part, Liverpool insisted that Agger, who is interesting Manchester City and Barcelona, was not in the right condition to be involved.

Gomel (4-2-3-1): V Bushma -- S Matveychik, I Voronkov, P Kirilchik, D Klimovich -- N Kashevski, S Kozeka (sub: A Timoshenko, 90min) -- A Levitski (sub: V Demidovich, 84), T Nowak (sub: N Lipatkin, 74), D Platonov -- A Alumona.

Substitutes not used: A Sakovich, P Yevseyenko, A Sheryakov, E Palomeque.

Booked: Klimovich, Alumona.

Liverpool (4-3-3): B Jones -- G Johnson (sub: M Kelly, 46), J Carragher, M Skrtel, J Enrique -- J Spearing, J Henderson (sub: L Leiva, 65), S Gerrard -- S Downing, F Borini, J Cole (sub: R Sterling, 23). Substitutes not used: P Gulacsi, J Robinson, J Shelvey, C Adam. Booked: Henderson, Jones.

Referee: I Kruzliak (Slovakia).

the guardian

Downing strikes after lacklustre Liverpool ride outrageous luck

Gomel 0

Liverpool 1

Downing 67

Brendan Rodgers made a winning start to his Liverpool managerial career as Stewart Downing secured a fortuitous Europa League qualifying victory over FC Gomel. If you cannot be good, be lucky, and the old saying certainly applied to the Northern Irishman's competitive debut in Belarus.

Jamie Carragher marked his 700th Liverpool appearance by captaining a team containing Steven Gerrard, and Rodgers' team grew stronger as the third qualifying round first leg wore on. Otherwise this was no more than a case of job done as a series of woeful finishes from FC Gomel saved the Anfield club from what should have been a punishing night.

The tie illustrated why a manager would prioritise the Premier League above European football's secondary competition, as Rodgers had done on the eve of his competitive debut. Liverpool faced travel problems and an accommodation shortage in Belarus before the game plus an obvious lack of match fitness and cohesion during it. Injury and fresh transfer speculation added to the Liverpool manager's difficulties before Downing, a man with much to prove at Anfield, delivered a win from nowhere.

Rodgers had left Andy Carroll on Merseyside despite including the West Ham United and Newcastle transfer target in his initial squad officially after the striker suffered a slight groin strain in training, and there was also no place in the travelling party for Daniel Agger, the Denmark international who has been subject of an inquiry from Manchester City.

Matters were no more straightforward on the pitch. Joe Cole, eager to resurrect a Liverpool career, lasted 14 minutes before pulling up with a hamstring injury. He was replaced by Raheem Sterling. Fabio Borini, the pounds 10m capture from Roma, turned a half-chance wide from a Downing corner and Glen Johnson headed over from Gerrard's free-kick. They were the only first-half threats from a Liverpool team who were fortunate to reach the interval on level terms.

Within a minute of the restart Dmitry Platonov broke away from Skrtel and rounded Jones only to take a heavy touch that sent the ball out of play and gave Liverpool another reprieve. That was nothing compared with their escape when Sergei Kozeka struck a post from 25 yards, Alumona sliced the rebound wide in front of an open goal but straight to Platonov who also miscued wide. Moments later Downing cut inside from the right and let fly from 25 yards with his left foot. The hosts' goalkeeper Vladimir Bushma was nowhere near it and Rodgers was off to a winning, eye-opening start.

FC Gomel 4-3-2-1

Bushma; Mitveychik, Kirilchik, Kashevski, Klimovich *; Kozeka *, Voronkov, Nowak (Lipatkin, 74); Levitski (Demidovich, 84), Platonov; Alumona *.

Subs not used Sakovich, Palomeque, Yevseyenko, Timoshenko, Sheryakov.

Liverpool 4-3-2-1

Jones; Johnson (Kelly, h-t), Skrtel, Carragher, Enrique; Gerrard, Spearing, Henderson * (Lucas, 65); Downing, Cole (Sterling, 24); Borini.

Subs not used Gulacsi, Robinson, Adam, Shelvey.

Referee I Kruzliak (Slovakia)

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The Mail

Rodgers is up and running

Gomel 0

Liverpool 1

HE SAT between his coaches, barely smiling, and offered nothing more than a polite round of applause.

Though his reaction was muted, for Brendan Rodgers the significance of a Stewart Downing goal 67 minutes into the first leg of a Europa League third-round qualifying tie should not be underestimated.

At the first attempt, his career as Liverpool manager is up and running.

On an evening when Rodgers had little to gain, it had appeared for long spells against FC Gomel in Belarus that his debut in the dug-out would end inauspiciously.

Thanks to a moment of inspiration from Downing, however, he was able to breathe a sigh of relief.

Rodgers took this assignment seriously: nine of his starting 11 were current or former internationals and only Luis Suarez, Pepe Reina and Daniel Agger could have strengthened Liverpool.

Agger's future has been the subject of debate but his agent Per Steffensen said: 'Daniel has not asked for a transfer. He is happy with Liverpool.' If Rodgers had been hoping for a comfortable start to his new job, the opening 45 minutes will have made uncomfortable viewing for him.

Bar a Glen Johnson header that sailed over and a Fabio Borini volley scuffed wide, Liverpool offered little as the Belarussians hustled and harried for every ball.

Aleksandr Alumona caused the most problems; he had four opportunities in 14 minutes and made life difficult for Martin Skrtel, who looked out of sorts. To make matters worse for Rodgers, he lost Joe Cole in the 23rd minute after the winger pulled a hamstring. Given how desperate Cole is to revive his career on Merseyside, the injury could not have come at a worse time.

Gomel should have gone ahead in the second half when Dzimtry Platonov sliced a glorious chance wide, seconds after Sergei Kozeka hit a post, and moments later they paid the price.

Downing did not have many options 25 yards out but it didn't matter as he cut inside and crashed a drive past Vladimir Bushma.

And with a second leg to come at Anfield, Liverpool have one foot in the next round.

MATCH FACTS

GOMEL (4-2-3-1): Bushma; Matveichik, Kirilchik, Kashevski, Klimovich; Kozeka (Timoshenko 90min), Voronkov; Nowak (Lipatkin 74), Levitski (Demidovich 84), Platonov; Alumona. Subs not used: Sakovich, Palomeque, Yevseyenko, Sheryakov.

Booked: Klimovich, Alumona.

LIVERPOOL (4-3-3): Jones; Johnson (Kelly 46), Carragher, Skrtel, Enrique; Spearing, Gerrard, Henderson (Lucas 66); Cole (Sterling 23), Borini, Downing. Subs not used: Gulacsi, Robinson, Adam, Shelvey.

Scorer: Downing 67.

Booked: Henderson.

Man of the match: Jamie Carragher.

Referee: Ivan Kruzliak (Slovenia).

Attendance: 12,500.

The Daily Telegraph

Rodgers starts with low-key victory

FC Gomel 0

Liverpool 1

Downing 67 Att: 12,220

Stewart Downing goals have been as rare and precious as Olympic Gold medals during his Liverpool career, but the England winger gave Brendan Rodgers the ideal start to his Anfield reign.

The winger notoriously enjoyed no goals and no assists in the Premier League last season (to be fair, he scored twice in the cups), but his 67th minute winner ensured Liverpool could celebrate a landmark evening in Eastern Europe.

If Rodgers is going to succeed in reviving the club, he first needs to revive those players he has inherited, so Downing's contribution was a welcome way to begin a new era.

Low key, in less than salubrious surroundings, Rodgers' Liverpool reign began with somewhat of a whisper.

The visit to Gomel in the Europa League third round qualifier will barely register in the chronicles of the club's European history, and yet for Rodgers and Liverpool's vice-captain, Jamie Carragher, this was an evening to remember, whatever the outcome.

Rodgers has now officially led Liverpool for the first time, while Carragher made his 700th appearance for the club, an unprecedented achievement in the modern era of squad rotation, managerial upheaval and here today, gone tomorrow signings.

This is Carragher's final season as a player, but it is telling that since his first meeting with Rodgers he has already assumed the role of chief lieutenant.

Despite the inclusion of club captain Steven Gerrard, Carragher was handed the armband in recognition of his landmark.

It was an absent centre half who took the attention prior to kick-off, however, as Daniel Agger's agent suggested his omission from the trip to Belarus was a mystery to the Dane, who is the subject of interest from Barcelona and Manchester City. "He is not injured. I can't answer why he is not in the team, that's the manager's and club's decision," said Per Steffensen.

Liverpool insist the defender needs more pre-season training before playing a competitive game, but the public show of disapproval from Agger's agent was provocatively timed.

The first goal of Rodgers' reign almost arrived after 13 minutes from a set-piece, Downing's corner volleyed narrowly wide by new signing Fabio Borini, but it was a rare early threat.

It was scrappiness personified and a laborious start was accentuated when Joe Cole limped off after 24 minutes with a pulled hamstring, offering an opportunity for teenager Raheem Sterling to try to liven proceedings.

Instead it was Gomel, who are 15 games into their domestic season, and who began to enjoy the self-billed 'biggest match in their history' especially with new signing Aleksandr Alumona peppering Brad Jones' goal.

Fortunately, the closing stages brought significant improvement and Liverpool took the lead with Downing's thunderbolt. The England winger cut in from the right flank, striking with the kind of venom and accuracy gold winning shooter Peter Wilson would have been proud of.

For the first time, Liverpool looked comfortable. Rodgers' won't be overly concerned about reviewing the edited highlights of his debut as Liverpool's manager, but the first win at his new club was worthy of the manager's clenched fist at the final whistle.

Gomel (4-5-1): Bushma; Matveychuk, Kirilchik, Kashevski, Klimovich; Kozeka, Voronkov, Nowak (Lipatkin 75), Levitski (Demidovich 85), Platonov; Alumona. Subs: Sakovich, Yevseyenko, Sheryakov, Timoshenko, Palomeque. Booked: Klimovich, Alumona.

Liverpool (4-3-3): Jones; Johnson (sub Kelly 45), Carragher, Skrtel, Enrique; Spearing, Gerrard, Henderson (Lucas 64); Cole (sub Sterling 24), Downing, Borini. Subs: Gulacsi, Lucas, Adam, Shelvey, Robinson. Booked: Henderson, Jones. Referee: I Kruzliak (Slovakia).

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BRENDAN PUTS DOWN MARKER

STEWART DOWNING produced a stunning bolt from the blue to get Brendan Rodgers' Anfield reign off to the perfect start. Yet it was hardly a serene introduction to Liverpool life for the new manager, with his side forced into desperate defence for long periods. Rodgers fielded a stronger side than expected for this visit to Belarus, and it was just as well because the Eastern Europeans threatened a major shock until Downing's brilliant goal on 65 minutes. These European backwaters are always dangerous shallows for Premier League teams forced to interrupt their pre-season preparations, and the Reds were almost shipwrecked before their ship really set sail, with Gomel producing enough to have put the tie beyond reach. Indeed, barely a minute before the opening goal, the home side should have scored when Sergey Kozeka smashed a shot against the post, and top-scorer Dmitry Platanov inexplicably rolled the return wide of an open goal. Downing responded in ruthless fashion to that shocking miss by destroying Gomel's hopes when he stepped inside from the right and unleashed a ferocious left-foot shot that flew past stunned home keeper Vladimir Bushma. It was just about Liverpool's first shot in anger, and offered the Belarusians a harsh lesson in the importance of finishing in European competition. Jamie Carragher was given the armband to mark his 700th Reds appearance, despite the surprise presence of Steven Gerrard in the side, but the defender had to work hard for the honour. For the first 45 minutes the visitors were on the back foot, with Carragher producing a captain's performance to keep Gomel at bay. Mind you, for all his efforts they still should have scored, with the usually deadly Platanov missing a hat-trick of simple chances, and his strike partner Aleksandr Alumona missing even more, the worst of which was a tame shot at keeper Brad Jones when he should have scored. Carragher denied the same striker a simple tap in with a brilliant clearance on the stroke of half time. But every bit as much as dollars, goals are the currency that speaks in this part of the world, and it was Downing who showed how to finish, to leave Rodgers content, if not entirely satisfied. The exhausting trip to Belarus seems to have generated more interest off the pitch than on it, with attention focused on those players who didn't travel. Andy Carroll was left out of the squad despite originally being named in the party to surely signal the end of his Anfield career, and a similar fate now seems likely for Daniel Agger, given his omission. Per Steffensen, Agger's agent, immediately stoked the fires of speculation. "He's not injured at all, I can't tell you why he isn't in the squad, only the club or the manager can," he said. "I can tell you he's not there only he asked for a transfer - that's nonsense." According to manager Rodgers, though, there is a simple explanation for the absence of the Denmark international, after he failed to train during much of the pre-season tour of North America. A spokesman for Liverpool said: "Daniel missed a lot of training in the US with a stomach problem that confined him to the hotel for some days, and the manager didn't think he was ready in terms of condition for this game." Virus notwithstanding, there must now be a real chance that Agger could move on, with the agent pushing links to both Manchester City and Barcelona, and Rodgers ready to cash in if the price is right, as he looks to raise funds to make further signings. GOMEL: Bushma, Matyevchik, Voronkov, Kirilchik, Klimovich, Kashevski, Kozeka, Levitski, Platanov, Nowak, Alumona. LIVERPOOL: Jones, Johnson (Kelly 46), Carragher, Skrtel, Enrique, Gerrard, Henderson (Lucas 66), Spearing, Downing, Borini, Cole (Sterling 24).

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Stewart Downing strikes to get Brendan Rodgers off to a winning start as LFC manager

ON the ledger of Liverpool FC's illustrious European history, their trip to Gomel in Belarus will rank particularly low. For Stewart Downing however it was a welcome high point in his Reds' career. And his winning goal was worthy of the club's standing on the continent, even if the team's performance was not.

On an evening of fresh starts, the England man rifled home a reminder to the new man in charge of just what he is capable.

Manager Brendan Rodgers will cherish the day he managed the Reds in a competitive match for the first time but other than Downing's goal, he will have little to remember it by. But then what did we really expect from the third qualifying round of the Europa League?

These ventures to European outposts often drain the flair and spark of the players whilst sapping the will of the most enthusiastic of supporter.

Nevertheless, Rodgers will be thankful.

Thankful that the beginning of his reign avoided defeat; pleased that Liverpool return to Anfield on Thursday night with the lead, a clean sheet and in control of the tie. Whether that was deserved, is up for serious debate.

Because after Liverpool survived a scare in the former Soviet Union, Rodgers breathed a sigh of relief. Had the blood not rushed to Dmitri Platonov's head then Gomel, on their most famous night, could have come to Anfield in six days' time with an advantage. But Liverpool emerged from this geographical and philosophical voyage into the unknown, unharmed and ready to progress to far more inviting European climes.

On a night sprinkled with personal milestones, which included Jamie Carragher making his 700th appearance for the club, collectively it was one to forget.

With Steven Gerrard back and Fabio Borini making his full debut, Liverpool's team-sheet looked relatively strong – though it was soon apparent which side were truly match sharp. Gomel, midway through their league season and having played four times in the competition already, fired in the first shot of the game.

Igor Voronkov blazed over from distance with the hosts also quickest into the referee's notebook as Dmitri Kilmovich left his mark on Downing with an ill-timed tackle. Downing escaped serious injury but Joe Cole's evening lasted just 23 minutes. Just when he had the ideal platform to impress the new manager, misfortune struck when his hamstring let him down.

Cole's disappointment was replaced by Raheem Sterling's joy as he came on for the former England man to become the second youngest player to represent Liverpool in European competition. Like his manager though, Sterling is sure to look back on the experience with mixed emotions as the Reds toiled for long spells in the warmth of the Belarusian night.

Borini grafted tenaciously but found minimal service and only his improvised volley from Downing's corner caught the attention of the Gomel goalkeeper.

Liverpool looked every inch a team who are still in their pre-season preparations. Loose in possession and half a yard off the pace, they were second best for long periods against the hosts who grew in confidence as the game progressed.

Aleksandr Alumona was profiting the most from Liverpool's mistakes.

Gradually edging closer with each effort, his first half assault brought about a smart save from Brad Jones just before half-time as Rodgers' side found their trip to Belarus increasingly comfortable.

He would have the Liverpool goalkeeper scrambling again with three minutes remaining, but could only find the side netting as Gomel chased an equaliser.

The 300 Reds fans who made the trip hoped for better after the break and would have been encouraged by Borini's low drive from the left, which brought about a first save from Vladimir Bushma. Improvements continued when Gerrard's in-swinging free-kick caused panic and Artur Levitski headed just wide of his own goal. But they were minor inroads and supporters will not have seen the goal coming. And when Sergei Kozeka hammered Jones' right hand post, with Platonov slashing the rebound wide from eight yards, Liverpool were reminded of the work still to be done. How grateful they were then from a bolt out of the blue.

Downing, largely lost in a wash of Liverpool's malaise, cut in from the right hand side and unleashed a vicious strike which left Bushma at full stretch, but with no chance. Liverpool, against the flow of the game, were ahead.

It knocked sufficient fight out of Gomel for Liverpool to close out the tie.

Talk of philosophies, formations and tactics must wait for the season to be in full swing. All we need to know here is that Liverpool did all that was asked. Just.

But crucially they can add Belarus to their list of Euro wins.

FC GOMEL (4-3-2-1): Bushma, Matveychik, Voronkov, Kirilchik, Kashevski, Kozeka, Kilmovich, Levitski (Demidovich 84), Nowak (Lipatkin 75), Platonov, Alumona.

Bookings: Kilmovich, Alumona.

LIVERPOOL (4-3-3): Jones, Johnson (Kelly 46), Carragher, Skrtel, Enrique, Spearing, Gerrard, Henderson, Downing, Cole (Sterling 23), Borini. Not used: Gulacsi, Adam, Shelvey, Robinson. Bookings: Henderson.

Goals: Downing (67).

REFEREE: Ivan Kruzilak (Slovakia).



Reds battle to Europe League win

BRENDAN Rodgers' first match in charge of Liverpool FC ended in victory after a 1-0 win against Gomel in their Europa League third qualifying round first leg tie at the Central Stadion in Belarus.

Stewart Downing's 25-yard effort midway through the second half was enough to give the Reds the edge going into the second leg match at Anfield next Wednesday.

Gomel dominated the majority of the game and Liverpool were lucky to leave with the win after the hosts missed plenty of chances.

Liverpool's back four looked rocky throughout and it was poor finishing rather than the performance of goalkeeper Brad Jones which cost the home side.

Gomel, who are halfway through their domestic season, were full of energy and pressed LFC high up the pitch, giving the visitors little time to dwell on the ball. Rodgers promised he would take the competition seriously and picked a strong side although Daniel Agger and Andy Carroll - both of whom have been linked with moves away from Anfield - stayed in the north-west.

Jamie Carragher made his 700th Liverpool appearance and was partnered in the heart of the defence by Martin Skrtel.

Joe Cole, who spent last season on loan at Lille, also started - while summer signing Fabio Borini led the line in a 4-3-3 formation.

However former Chelsea man Cole lasted just 23 minutes as he hobbled off with what appeared to be a hamstring injury, with 17-year-old Raheem Sterling his replacement.

Both teams began slowly although Liverpool FC showed they were already buying into the Rodgers approach, with the vast majority of their football played on the floor.

Sadly for the Merseysiders it failed to yield opportunities and it was Gomel who created the first chance 25 minutes in.

Dmitri Platonov skipped past Gerrard and surged to the byline before delivering an accurate cross to Igor Voronkov, who headed over from close range.

Five minutes before the break and central defender Martin Skrtel was first outmuscled and then outpaced by striker Aleksandr Alumona, who shot straight at Jones - with the Australian deflecting the effort wide.

The danger was far from over and a short corner from Gomel caught the visitors out and Platonov should have tested Jones with a free header from 10 yards out, but mistimed and looped his effort over.

The hosts took just a minute to create an opportunity in the second half as once again the backline fell asleep as Platonov was played outside by Carragher and raced away down the left.

The forward rounded Jones but his touch was too heavy as the ball ran away for a goal-kick.

Liverpool had another let off and it was Platonov who again went close after 65 minutes. Jay Spearing gave the ball away cheaply and Sergei Kozeka hit a rasping shot which cannoned onto the post with Jones well beaten.

The rebound fell to Alumona who completely mishit his effort into the path of Platonov who, with the goal gaping, somehow shot wide.

Gomel were made to pay for their incompetence in front of goal as just two minutes later - following the introduction of Lucas for Jordan Henderson - the visitors were in front.

Downing cut inside from the right and unopposed from 25 yards fired past Vladimir Bushma into the left hand corner.

The goal deflated the home side, with Liverpool keeping possession well for the remainder of the game.

The visitors could have doubled their lead late on as Borini, who lacked service all night, burst through. However Bushma forced the Italian wide and parried the striker's effort away from danger.

However Liverpool left with a win and a clean sheet as they seek to make sure of an extended run in this season's Europa League.